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ICRC

International Committee of the Red Cross

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ICRC visits to persons deprived of their freedom: an internationally mandated task, implemented worldwide

Topics: Why visit prisoners? - The role of the ICRC - Purpose of the visits

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Why visit prisoners?

Visiting people deprived of their freedom in connection with conflict is a core protection task of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

The principle of the visits is that because people who are taken prisoner or detained during, or as a result of, a conflict, are regarded by their captors as the enemy, they need the intervention of a neutral, independent body to ensure that they are treated humanely and kept in decent conditions, and that they have the possibility of exchanging news with their families.

During the First and Second World Wars, countless numbers of prisoners - whether American, British, French, German or of other nationalities - benefitted from these visits, and from the dispatch of parcels and messages from home. This work continues today, for example through the visits to prisoners of war taken in the conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea, or in the Western Sahara.

Humanity, impartiality, neutrality....

The point about international humanitarian law - including the Geneva Conventions and all other treaties which protect people during conflict - is that no distinction is made between one side or another; there are no degrees of humane treatment reserved for certain groups according to their supposed merits; no "good or "bad" victims, "worthy" or unworthy": **all prisoners are entitled to humane treatment.**

The role of the ICRC

The ICRC was created almost 140 years ago to deal with the problems of one specific group of war victims: wounded soldiers. But it was not long before the organisation, because of its widely recognised neutrality, was able to compile lists of prisoners taken in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870. The simple fact of transmitting these lists provided immense relief for anxious families back home, and remains at the heart of the ICRC's role in war-time.

Over the years the ICRC increased its activities in this field, and in the revised Geneva Conventions of 1949 was given a clear mandate from the international community to ensure that the detailed rules of the Conventions were applied. Prisoners of war are specifically protected under these rules.

The ICRC also has the recognized right to offer its services to visit another category of people detained during internal conflicts and strife - variously known as "security" or "political" detainees. In an overwhelming number of cases, the ICRC has been able to persuade the warring parties in conflicts around the world to treat these detainees in accordance with the humanitarian principles set out in the Geneva Conventions, which have been adopted by virtually every country in the world.

This principle has enabled the ICRC, as a specifically neutral intermediary in conflicts, to insist on access to prisoners on all sides, whether UN peacekeepers in Bosnia, US soldiers in Yugoslavia, or British soldiers in Iraq, to give but a few examples. And this same principle underlies the ICRC's action in visiting Taliban and al-Qaida members held by US or Afghan forces - no more, no less.

Experience has shown that respect for basic humanitarian rules in war-time, apart from preventing or at least limiting atrocities, also helps restore trust and eases reconciliation in the post-conflict stage. Non-respect for the rules, on the other hand, can lead to a vicious spiral of cruelty in which there are no winners.

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The purpose of the ICRC visits

First, what they do NOT seek to achieve: the liberation of prisoners (other than particular individual cases, on strict medical or other humanitarian grounds).
The standard ICRC procedures, which are made clear with the detaining authorities prior to the visits, include registration of the prisoners; an overview of all facilities used by, or intended for, them; a private talk with any or all of them, to discuss any problems they might have over their treatment or conditions; the provision of standard forms for writing a brief message to their families (which after approval by the detaining authorities will be delivered by the ICRC, insofar as this is possible). If the prisoners agree, their problems are taken up with the authorities immediately, with the aim of trying to solve them.

The reports written by the ICRC after each visit are given to the detaining authorities and are not intended for publication **- the point being that detention problems are best solved through constructive dialogue based on mutual confidence, rather than in the glare of publicity which inevitably carries the risk of politicizing the issues. This is why the ICRC will not comment publicly on such issues as possible problems concerning the transportation of prisoners or their conditions of detention.**

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